

## Fresno Debates Pedestrian Mall's Future

Fresno, California, is thinking about ripping up its historic pedestrian mall—again. The result is high emotion—again.

But there's a difference this time. It's not all talk. Mayor Ashley Swearengin is spending a lot of public bucks to bring automobile traffic back to Fulton Mall. "We tried," Swearengin says. "It's not working."

The mayor's plan is to tear out the concrete walkways, rearrange most of the public art, and build a two-lane road that would return vehicular traffic to what was once the busiest stretch of Fresno's main drag, Fulton Avenue. Her case is simple: The big retailers fled long ago, shoppers love their cars, and retailers go where the shoppers are.

Two planning efforts under way in Fresno—being crafted by a team led by Pasadena architects Moule & Polyzoides—include three alternatives for the Fulton Mall. The first would reconnect the pre-mall street grid, eliminating most of the art and fountains. The second would add cars and street parking while retaining most of the public amenities. This is Swearengin's choice. The third would restore the mall to its 1964 luster, with new landscaping, better lighting, and repaired fountains. The city council has the final say.

There is a small but fierce band of leave-the-mall-alone activists. They threaten lawsuits, saying the nearly half-century-old pedestrian mall is a historic resource. Harold Tokmakian, AICP,



Timothy Menzel

Twenty sculptures, 21 water features, and several murals inhabit the six-block, pedestrian-only section of Fulton Avenue. For years the city has sought ways to inject more life into the sagging area, now dominated by low-end clothing stores, sandwich shops, and vacant storefronts.

Fresno City Hall once loved the mall. The vision was born in the 1950s, when civic leaders worried about a stagnant downtown. The city hired Victor Gruen to remake three square miles of central Fresno. There were several phases to Gruen's plan. Its signature piece was a 65-acre "superblock" anchored by Fulton Mall, which opened in 1964.

Cars were banned. Art work, fountains, and landscaping abounded. Walkers ruled. But sales barely budged over the first five years and things started to go downhill in the 1970s. Since then, the city has considered and rejected roofing over the mall, building a San Antonio-style canal, and opening the northern two blocks to cars.

Today, nearly one in four mall storefronts is empty. A handful of high rises, some dating back nearly a century, are mostly or totally empty. The most popular retailer is a chain drugstore.

professor emeritus of planning at California State University, Fresno, is a mall supporter. The mall has loyal customers, he says, but the city's "commitment to stewardship of the public trust is absolutely abominable."

Henry Beer, founding partner of the design firm Communication Arts, Inc. (now owned by Stantec) of Boulder, Colorado, visited downtown Fresno eight years ago. "It had all the hallmarks of a failed central business district," Beer says. "The mall sat right in the middle of it."

Some pedestrian malls work, says Beer, who helped develop the very successful Pearl Street Mall in Boulder. Most don't until they reintroduce vehicular traffic, he adds. Beer's recommendation to Fresno: Bring back the cars.

—George Hostetter

*Hostetter is a reporter for the Fresno Bee.*